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Not Sure (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Suk, John. *Not Sure*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 207 pp. ISBN 978-0-8028-6650-9. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English, Dordt College

If you are absolutely, perfectly sure that once upon a time there were, in fact, two naked people tending the greenest garden of flowery delights, something beyond human imagination, and that those two, male and female, got themselves and all of mankind brought into sin and darkness by a serpent who conned them into eating the only forbidden fruit in the whole garden; if you absolutely believe that Adam and Eve, the only belly-button-less human beings in history, were literally our first opa and oma; if you're beyond-a-shred-of-a-doubt convinced that the world began in exactly the way Genesis says it did, then John Suk's new book, *Not Sure*, is not for you. Maybe you shouldn't read it.

But if, for instance, you just occasionally have doubts about a six-day creation, or if you're not absolutely sure that gay marriage is the worst thing that could happen ever to America—worse than, say, the racism of your own white grandparents—or if you sometimes wonder whether all the stridency inherent in the pro-life debate doesn't cloud at least some other viable moral issues; if there are times in your life—say when you visit Dachau or Auschwitz—or even when you consider the woman next door, scared to death and praying her eyes out for relief of her mother's cancer; if you find yourself feeling completely alone in the universe, wondering whether, in fact, God Almighty has left the room, has forsaken you, then you'll find *Not Sure* something akin to a breath of fresh air.

If you think Tim Tebow's flashy gridiron testimony is more than slightly over-the-top, you'll like the book. If Mother Teresa's long and difficult battle with profound spiritual doubt doesn't surprise or shock you, you will too. If you don't think you have the kind of “personal relationship with Jesus” that some ebullient Christians seem to, you'll find *Not Sure* refreshing. If sometimes you get really tired of the smug righteousness of American evangelicalism and its political arms, you'll love the book. If you didn't go to Promise Keepers with your grandson or your father or your favorite uncle, even though every other male in church did and came back high as a kite, you'll know exactly what Suk is talking about in *Not Sure*—and you'll thank him.

For the record, I really, really, really enjoyed *Not Sure* because there are times, Lord save me, I'm not either.

I have quibbles with Dr. Suk. *Not Sure* isn't holy writ, after all. Like many Canadian, post-World War II Dutch immigrants and their kids, he, it seems to me, doesn't quite understand the old-line CRC people, one of whom I am. He doesn't understand the nature of the pietism of the

afscheiding, the separation people; but that's not a sin. However, using Sietze Buning's (which is to say Dr. Stanley Wiersma's) fictional parents to explain pre-Kuyperian CRC people—how they looked or thought at least—is like using Amos 'n Andy to describe African-Americans, or any of a thousand absent-minded professors to critique American higher education. Did they plant corn on the square? Probably. But then, there was a time when most everyone in corn country planted their corn that way; thousands—Catholics and Methodists and Lutherans—did it because that's the way they were taught, not because the square somehow patterned predestination. Over the top.

Suk's discussion of the Half-way Covenant and the early American pilgrims and puritans might well have been stronger had he read Perry Miller, and I tend to think he's a little over-zealous about communication theory, sometimes making human beings into victims of societal changes we seem powerless to stifle or withstand. That we change isn't really at issue. But we wouldn't see ourselves in Hamlet if we evolved as radically as, I sometimes guess, Suk believes we have. What we read and how we read changes dramatically; human nature doesn't.

Most embarrassingly, he trashes his two-year stint here at Dordt College because of what he seems to believe was an ideological strait-jacket clamped around students who chose to enroll when he was here—early '70s. DC's too vigorous espousal of the neo-Kuyperian way, he suggests, was something akin to tomfoolery. I think we make, for him, a too convenient punching bag; but then, back then, he was 18 years old and the times were a'changin' drastically during DC's own tumultuous, un-civil war years.

Truth be told, his confession of doubt—the heartbeat of the book—seemed to me to be far less thorny than I thought it would be. Honestly, I expected something more Christopher Hitchens. What he does throughout is create a kind of memoir of his own pilgrimage. But the book isn't simply memoir because it also reviews and recounts historical epochs (Modernism, post-modernism) with some care because it is Suk's deftly argued thesis that, as a member of this particular generation, his doubt is, in some ways, understandable. He is not, after all, his preacher father. The world around him—and them, and all of us—has changed. Once upon a time, he maintains, desire for dogma created a variety of different Christian fellowships. Today, he says, that desire has diminished for many reasons, one of them being that many of us don't read as we used to. Those paths—the path of his own faith and that of our culture—are, he suggests, parallel lines.

Most of the time, I know pretty much exactly what he feels when questions—real questions—loom before him. Last night in church, we sang “Abide with Me,” a hymn we rarely sing anymore, a classic so evocative of cherished childhood moments that I wished I could have gone back, just for an hour maybe, to the old church. The Holden Caulfield in me wanted a return to childhood because, as I’ve grown older, my own doubt has grown; but then so has my understanding of the world we live in and my perception of just who I am. These days I think I know my sin more fully than I care to say, and that’s why I find also find grace vastly more amazing than I ever could have as a child. The sweet old hymn sounds much different today, beautiful but much different to my ears and in my heart. Sometimes I wish I could go back. Don’t we all?

A Laotian woman, a Christian, told me her story in great detail once upon a time, how she’d crossed the Mekong in what she described as a little homemade dug-out, her children inside. She was aware of soldiers ready to shoot her and her kids right out of the water, which they often did. It was night. The water was cold. But she wanted to get to the other side, to freedom. She described herself, chest-deep, in the waters of the Mekong. “I prayed and prayed and prayed,” she told me, almost crying as she remembered the danger.

That was years before she’d ever heard of Jesus—or if she had, it was by only the slightest mention. I remember wondering just then who exactly was she praying to? I asked her. She didn’t know—all she knew was that she prayed. Hard. Would God—who I believe had to hear that

prayer—shrug it off because it didn’t come in the name of Jesus? Would he turn away? Would he say, “Well, sorry, but you’re on your own.” Really?

John Suk’s *Not Sure* lays out the nature of the faith a lot of us struggle to hold securely at times—me too. When I came to the end of the book, however, what I really started to believe about Dr. Suk was that he was even doubtful about doubt. *Not Sure* does not end the kind of darkness one can’t deny in Psalm 88. It ends more like Psalm 13—with faith, at least what I’d call faith. It ends with honesty and aspiration and the kind of trembling trust that lots of believers have even though the Tebows get the headlines.

Would Suk’s views on gay marriage and human evolution and other hot-button items keep him out of the pulpit at my church? Yes, it would, I’m sure. And there lies the problem, maybe the most difficult problem the book creates.

His book offers an approach to solving that problem. He asks for a church that doesn’t judge, a church that only loves, a church without doctrinal walls. In the history of Christianity, those places generally do poorly, and that too is a problem.

But most of the time this believer found *Not Sure* to be thoughtful, earnest, and, finally, faithful. Even encouraging.

Some won’t, I’m sure.

But I think King David would, and so would Mother Teresa. They’ve been there themselves—not always perfectly sure, that is.

Smith, Christian. *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011. 220pps. ISBN 978-1-58743-303-0. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., former lecturer at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia; visiting professor at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary, Riga, Latvia; and author of *Spiritual Disciplines: The Tasks of a Joyful Life* and *Worship: Discovering What Scripture Says*, both published by Shaw Books.

Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, has written extensively on religion and sociology. He is best known for his ground-breaking studies of religion among young people in their teens and twenties: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005) and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009). He is also the author of *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (2010). While much of Smith’s writing is survey and interview-based, standard fare for sociologists, he has also produced philosophical anthropology, such as *What Is a Person?* and *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003). He has twice focused on evangelical culture, producing *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (1998) and *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want* (2000).

In *The Bible Made Impossible*, Smith offers his observations on evangelical teaching about the Bible—some of which he views with alarm—and suggests a better hermeneutic. While he believes in the full authority of the Bible and greatly sympathizes with evangelicals’ belief in the Bible, he wishes that they would take the Bible as it is, not as what they would wish it to be.

Smith’s argument unfolds in two stages: “The Impossibility of Biblicism” and “Toward a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture.” In reading this book, we must keep in mind that his approach is to describe a social phenomenon (evangelical biblical theory and reading practices) and that his proposals are designed to work within the evangelical mindset: a sociological approach, not a theological one. As such, his work explains not only the social group but how it might be more true to its nature, more truly evangelical.